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## Inside if wet: a very British event

**When high winds and intermittent rain forced the Allam British Open squash tournament to switch venues Mick Owen was on hand to witness the fallout.**

The British Open was, in its day, the most prestigious prize in world squash; Barrington won it, Jahangir Khan won it ten years in a row and everyone else wanted to win it. With bigger money tournaments springing up around the world and the axis of the global game moving first to Pakistan and now Egypt, the grand old dame still attracts the big names but the pressure to “move to another level” must be palpable.

Whether it was the “push” of that pressure which led to this year’s Allam British Open being played at a football stadium or the “pull” of England Squash and Racketball’s new sugar daddy, Assem Allam, which led someone to think it would be good to emulate foreign tournaments and erect a glass court on a stage outdoors in the corner of the KC Stadium – home of Hull City FC and therefore part of Dr Allam’s fiefdom – must go unrecorded. However it was reached, the upshot of that decision, once acted on by the vagaries of a British climate driven incoherent by the likes of Jeremy Clarkson and Michael O’Leary (and we did hear the Top Gear presenter and self-promoting bombast Clarkson being blamed by one official clearly close to his wit’s end) was that the Friday of the event became a bizarre mix of frustration, ingenuity and the blitz spirit at work.

Having spotted a gap in The Leisure Review diary and recognised an opportunity to revisit an event which first featured in our pages in November 2007, your correspondent recruited squash aficionado Wayne Burgreave and applied for accreditation. At that point headlines such as “To Hull and Back: how squash went East” were as far as the article plan went with the assumption being that a day enjoying media room coffee and a warm seat in the body of the hall while my new colleague picked up on all the technical nuances would supply inspiration enough. What had not been factored in was the possibility of sitting in an outdoor grandstand while picking out the action between North Sea squalls. As our journey over the Pennines on a windswept M62 progressed, this prospect seemed even less attractive and, with the driver’s report of James Wilstrop having been forced to leave the courts because rain had indeed stopped play, the decision was made to check with someone actually in Hull on how things looked pitch- and indeed sea-side.

Our interlocutor gave mixed news. The good news was there was no need to sit outside as the stadium health and safety man had banned all play until the 50mph wind had died down. Also good was the news that someone had a contingency plan, which involved all eight quarter-finals being played at an alternative venue. The bad news, which became apparent on arrival at the Hull and East Riding Squash Club, was that the very best players in the world were being asked to perform in the 1980s.

Having parked on the weed-strewn gravel shared with the local cricketers and wandered towards what we took to be the entrance of the club, we passed four older ladies on their way out from their weekly squash morning. That Nicol David was at that moment recording a [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

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regulation three-nil win on the court they had had booked was not going to interrupt the gentle cycle of their lives and as we moved through the leylandii protecting cars from a well-struck, if uppish, off drive from the scoreboard end we moved back in time.

As a player in the same leisure-centre squash club team for over thirty years, our travelling expert was very familiar with the type of venue we stepped into: small bar, smaller changing rooms, four courts below a wood-panelled balcony and the "fifth court", the championship court, added in 1983 and found down a passageway not much wider than the shoulders of one Ellery Hanley who walked in to watch the second women's game of the day just as The Leisure Review team were signing out.

With spectator seating a raked series of boxes capable of accommodating only some 50 people, the paying public were the most obvious casualty of the hurried reorganisation. Ten minutes into the first men's quarter-final the worry was that squash itself might go missing in action. Players who move as quickly as "up and coming young Egyptian, Tarek Momen" and former champion Gregory Gaultier, the French virtuoso who had so enraptured your correspondent seven years ago, need to be able to rely on their footing. The show court failed to supply this basic requirement. That Gaultier noticed the lack more whenever he lost a key rally may be the observation of a cynic; or the observation of a cynic at work. Our expert was sure that the incessant stoppages for mopping, brushing, dusting and towelling suited the older player and the Frenchman's post-match observation that, as the heavier of the two, he required more stability seemed more like magical thinking than a valid explanation.

With the entertainment over the audience shuffled towards the exit and the intimacy of the venue involved squeezing past the sweaty backside of a bending Gaultier. It seemed only polite to offer a few words of congratulation for what looked very like a marker being put down. The Frenchman, his sangfroid returned, grunted an acknowledgement and proffered a shrug: "C'est la vie", as they say in Epinal.

Shrugs were very much in evidence in the bar area as sponsors' guests, journalists and the event's functionaries looked out over the storm-tossed outfield and repeated various versions of "the show must go on". The conditions were poor; nobody could predict the English weather; best of a bad job; the games had to be played. And so on.

Faced with watching the world's best making the most of a depressing and damp squib or beat the rush hour traffic, the TLR team chose the latter option, pausing only to be complained to by a man from Aberystwyth who had travelled five hours with four young squash players only to be refused entry. That they had seen one game already, were eating the sponsors' food and had been given programmes signed by most of the best players in the world were evidence that one of the casualties of unplanned developments is perspective.

As we said our farewells to the stiff upper-lipped stewards and handed back our press credentials we counted the blessings for the disrupted event. The show had gone on, squash was being played, the press and the sponsors had been mollified, and the weather forecast for the weekend was for sun and light winds. And the memory of a day spent at the heart of English squash would fade soon enough.

**Mick Owen is the managing editor of The Leisure Review.**

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